



## **Remarks to City Council on Relocation of Confederate Monuments in New Orleans**

By Mayor Mitch Landrieu

July 9, 2015

*As prepared for delivery*

Thank you so much for having me.

As a city and nation, we are a work in progress. As we seek to become a more perfect union, what makes us special as Americans is that we define ourselves not by the past, but by the constant struggle to achieve the aspirations enshrined in our founding creed: that all are created equal.

And, it is in this uniquely American spirit that we prepare for 2018 and our 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a city. Post-Katrina, we are building the city back not as it was, but the city we always dreamed she could be.

The people of New Orleans, through the Welcome Table for racial reconciliation, have already started to do the hard work chipping away at the walls that divide us – literally bringing together a diverse array of people to talk, eat, share, and build trust.

Now, in this same spirit, I am again calling on the people of New Orleans.

I come before you today to discuss the relocation of four monuments in prominent areas throughout New Orleans.

They include: the Robert E Lee statue at Lee Circle, the Jefferson Davis statue on Jefferson Davis Parkway, the PGT Beauregard equestrian statue on Esplanade Avenue at the entrance to City Park, and the Battle of Liberty Place Monument at Iberville Street.

I also am proposing we rename Jefferson Davis Parkway to Dr. Norman C. Francis Parkway.

Today, with your assistance, we will launch a 60-day period where through facilitated conversations and public meetings, using the Welcome Table, the Human Relations Commission and the City Council, we the people of New Orleans will find the way forward in regard to these four confederate monuments.

Here is what I believe.

To maintain these symbols as we move towards our future seems to belie our progress and does not reflect who we truly are or who we want to be.

How can we expect to inspire a nation when our most prominent public spaces are dedicated to the reverence of the fight for bondage and supremacy of our fellow Americans? These ideals never really belonged in a city as great as New Orleans and whose life blood flows from our diversity.

This is about more than Robert E Lee the man or P.G.T. Beauregard or Jefferson Davis or the White League.

This discussion isn't about them; it is about us – the people of New Orleans and our beloved city.

These monuments were built to reinforce the false valor of a war fought over slavery, but New Orleans has always been a city of diversity and inclusion.

These monuments were erected at a time when supremacy was the order of the day in much of the South, but a lot has changed since the Civil War.

Many groups and individuals did not have a voice when these monuments were first erected. Now they do, and they should be heard. Their perspectives are important as we seek to remember the breath and sweep of our entire history – not just a small part of it with a narrow view.

Supremacy may be a part of our past, but it is not a part of our future.

Consider this, New Orleans is nearly 300 years old and was founded 150 years before the Civil War even occurred. Our identity is much broader and richer than the symbols of Confederate times. So, our history before and after the Civil War should not be neglected, nor our identity defined simply by the Confederacy.

At our best, we are a place where diversity is our greatest strength;

A place where all are welcome;

A place where symbols should inspire and include, not divide;

A place where we celebrate life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness - not death, war and slavery.

That is not to say we should erase or uproot our past. We simply cannot do that. As a southern city, we should not look away from our history. Rather this is about fully reckoning with the past.

So, let's talk for a second about the most prominent of these monuments – the statue of Robert E Lee.

He was a Confederate General for the Army of Northern Virginia. He had little to no connection to New Orleans. His statue was placed at Tivoli Circle nearly 20 years after the end of the Civil War – shortly following his death to commemorate the “Cult of the Lost Cause.”

While I agree that Gen. Lee is an important historical figure and that he should be remembered in the right context as a part of history, I don't believe that his place in the history of New Orleans should be revered. There is a difference.

The question is whether this prominent circle is the appropriate place to commemorate and learn about the general and his place in history or whether this space should be reserved for something that represents the fullness of who we are and what we want to be.

And to all those who think the Gen. Lee statue should not be relocated and that the other monuments should remain in place or think that it doesn't really matter, I would ask that you consider the question from another perspective.

Think about the 10-year old African-American girl learning about her place in this world and her city. In 2015, we hope this girl knows that her potential is limitless and that the sins of the past don't define her future. But, imagine her looking up at Gen. Lee on top of that ornate pedestal.

What might she think when her dad explains why Gen. Lee is up there, the “cult of the lost cause” and how her city still maintains public space specifically designed to glorify and celebrate white supremacy.

Her likely reaction is obvious.

I think it would be better if this young American could see something that would make her feel proud of her city and inspire her to greatness.

So, again, relocating these four Confederate memorials is not about the individual historical figures, but about the broader context of the monuments themselves and how they fit into our history and how they inspire us today.

That is the point. And, we ignore this truth at our own peril.

Throughout our history, some refuse to change or are cynical and believe we cannot change; that our divisions are somehow part of the natural order of things.

Time and again, we prove the doubters wrong. There is nothing we can't do, but only if we make the commitment, listen to each other, see each other, feel each other, hear each other and stay united as one. *E Pluribus Unum* – “out of many, one.”

After all, this work is an extension of the struggle that is American history. Indeed, in 1776 the words of the Declaration of Independence rang hollow to many living at that time and must have been especially ironic to the slave. For them, neither liberty nor equality were in reach.

We must never forget our history. For those who do will be condemned to repeat it. Therefore, we should place these statues in their proper place and context. Simply stated: remembrance yes, reverence no.

We should seize this moment and do our part to remove these symbols of supremacy from places of reverence that no longer, if ever, reflect who we are.

This is how we choose to build our city back; not the way it was, but how we always dreamed she could be. I believe that New Orleans is a place where the original vision of America rings authentic and true: that all men are created equal. However, make no mistake, these statues are symbols that reflect the opposite of our shared American values.

The moral arc of the history bends as it usually does, towards justice. But, it does not bend on its own. That is left to us.

Let's start bending it together – toward our shared future.

Thank you.

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